

Rethinking Islamic Studies

The debates between religion and science raise questions about the current discussions on the Islamic discourse, which is explained in isolation from the scientific analysis of the religious phenomenon. Religious thought confirms its ideas by referring to “sacred” texts, and tends to adopt two main attitudes toward scientific knowledge. It either rejects scientific knowledge by confirming its superior analysis, or asserts that there is harmony between scientific knowledge and faith, especially in matters related to human rights, democracy, tolerance, and social justice.

The scientific study of religion does not merely describe social, cultural, political, legal, and educational situations; it is rather concerned about epistemological and methodological issues related to history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, psychology, and psychoanalysis. These sciences change and renovate the methods of research, and connect human structures with the discoveries of biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. This means that the scientific discoveries affect our perspectives of the matter, the world, and the universe. The point here is not to prefer scientific thought over religious thought, but to show how these thoughts have practical implications on humanity and the world.

The methodological problem in studying religion scientifically is how to liberate scientific criticism from epistemological limitations imposed by the dogmatic mind on the intellectual and cultural practices. The analysis of human thought is inevitably affected by the ideological consolidation between the state, writing, literate culture, and orthodox code. This indicates that the dogmatic mind is not related only to Islamic thought. It is evident that most of the writings on the Islamic phenomenon have been epistemologically subjected to intellectual postulations formed by “classical” Muslim authors. This means that many scholars of Islam today depend on sources and references produced by Muslim authors, and use the term “Islam” without differentiating between the Quranic discourse and the dogmatic mind that shaped the Muslim perspectives of Islam. In other words, the epistemological structure of many works on Islam and “Muslim societies” is influenced by the epistemological framework of Muslim scholasticism.

After Edward W. Said’s remarkable criticism of Orientalism, many European and North American Islamologists became apprehensive of carrying out critical analyses of Islam and the “Muslim world.” It is noticeable that these Islamologists work in small, secluded departments, and have no considerable influence in their societies. Moreover, some of the well-known centres for the study of Islam are funded by Arab and Muslim figures. This is why many works describe “Islam” and “Muslim societies” according to “Muslim perspectives.” This means that there is tendency to gather and accumulate information, and to ignore the archaeology and deconstruction of Islamic knowledge. Indeed, it is no longer desirable to translate “Muslim” works into European languages without any scientific criticism and epistemological engagement. There should be a balance between academic erudition and the deconstruction of knowledge.

The scientific approach to Islamic studies is necessary because the adjectives “Islamic” and “Muslim” are uncritically used to explain everything related to “Muslims,” even if these “Muslims” are Europeans and North Americans. It is obvious that many works use the term “Islam” to describe multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic

communities. Thus, terms such as “the Quranic phenomenon” and the “Islamic phenomenon” are necessary to emphasise the fact that “Islam” is only a factor in forming human societies, and to provoke historical-sociological perspectives, anthropological inquiry, and philosophical criticism.

Like the case of European Christianity and Judaism, Islam must be studied scientifically because religious orthodoxy prevents the opening of historical issues, such as the formation of the Quranic text, and the historical development of Sunni, Shiite, and Kharijite traditions. Religious orthodoxy is a hindrance to explaining matters as they actually were in the first centuries of Islam. In fact, religious orthodoxy is connected with the predominance of collective *imaginaire* that constitutes a powerful force in human history. It imposes a kind of sociological myths that disregard historical and scientific realities. Therefore, the comparative application of the methodologies of human and social sciences to Islamic studies is important because it endeavours to liberate the Islamic discourse from violent dogmatism, and displaces the paradigms of orthodoxy. It also affirms that Islam is not a “special case,” because the phenomenon of the sacred exists in every human society.

This does not mean that the scientific study of Islam must reject the orthodox ideas about the formation of the Quranic text, the Prophetic Traditions, Muslim jurisprudence, and Muslim sects; rather, the scientific study should show how orthodoxy could dominate the Islamic discourse for many centuries. This raises questions about the relationship between the symbolic and the material, and the transformation of the symbolic into a compelling material power that affects the course of history. Of course, orthodox ideas did not play the same role in the classical and scholastics ages. Yet, all Muslim ideas before the “modern age” were dominated by medieval episteme.

Obviously, there is a great difference between the scientific research on European and North American societies and the research on “Muslim societies.” It is true that the Orientalist discourse constructs a scientific knowledge about Islamic studies; yet, it adopts a linear approach to history, and does not criticise the ideological boundaries which the Islamic discourse produces. This means that the Orientalist discourse, which claims to depend on the academic values of research, strengthens and spreads the orthodox slogans of the Islamic discourse. For instance, many scholars still say that “Islam” is a comprehensively political, cultural, social, legal, and economic system, or a religion and state. This means that Islamic studies, whether in Europe or in the Arab world, is based on Islamic logocentrism, in a sense that the Islamologists use representative texts and authors selected by the Muslim jurisprudential schools. “Non representative” works, authors, and communities are marginalised or ignored.

Moreover, the Orientalist, philological, historicist approach overlooks historical anthropology, and ignores the concept of *imaginaire* and myth that inspire human communities. For instance, the Cambridge works on Arabic literature and Islamic history do not analyse the writing of history, geography, and philological thought, or the beginnings of theology, commentary, and asceticism. There is nothing in these works about the individual *imaginaire* that participates with mind and memory in shaping perception and realisation. There is also nothing about the concept of episteme and the collective *imaginaire* as a repository for perceptions about reality. The Quranic and Prophetic stories are represented as reasonable formations, while they are indebted to the

imaginaire that forms the myths of every community, and contributes to the foundation of communities and their identities.

The human and social sciences attempt to explain the anthropology of *imaginaire*, and the sociology of the mythical, ritual, historical, and literary elements. Yet, the Islamologists do not study the production of meaning and its effects. This indicates that their scholarship is still marginal in regard to the scientific research that scholars apply to their European and North American societies. Moreover, the Islamologists ignore the semiotic systems that form the religious field and its relevant elements, such as myths and rites. They reduce their scholarship to thought (theology, philosophy, and law) as a part of the history of ideas. They are also motivated by their ethnocentric, historicist visions. Thus, Islamic studies are marginalised within the framework of “Western culture,” and the application of the methodologies of human and social sciences, which were developed after the 1950s, remain fragmentary and biased.

It is, of course, difficult to talk about a scientific approach to the study of Islam, especially because the current political incitation of the Islamic discourse is sociologically and psychologically dominant. While “Western” powers and media speak of “Islamic fundamentalism” and “Islamic terrorism,” Muslim scholars, especially in societies dominated by the Islamic phenomenon, defend their religious orthodoxy, and forbid scientific criticism of Islamic ideas and founding texts. Even so-called liberal and secular Muslim intellectuals still claim that the ideas of democracy, freedom, and secularism exist in the Islamic founding texts, and do not carry out scientific analyses of Islamic teachings under the pretext of defending the “Arab-Muslim world” from the attacks of Orientalism and imperialism. Indeed, the intellectual, political, social and economic problems in “Muslim” countries explain the decrease in scientific production.

In short, it is no longer possible, from an academic point of view, that each religion is studied separately. The human and social sciences will greatly benefit and gain more credibility when they are applied to a great religion like Islam. And, of course, many scholars and students of religious studies will widen their understanding of the religious phenomenon if Islam is included in their research work.

William Al-Sharif